

Mental Illness and Guns: Myths Vs. Facts

In the wake of another horrific school shooting, Americans are searching for reasons to explain why a person would commit such an atrocity. Already, many are blaming mental illness, as we have long been conditioned to associate mental illness with violence. But the idea that mentally ill means violent is simply a myth.

MYTH: Mental illness causes gun violence and mass shootings.

FACT: Mental illness is not a significant risk factor for or a predictor of interpersonal violence.

The majority of people with mental illness do not engage in violence against others, and most violence is caused by factors *other* than mental illness.¹

- Individuals with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of violence.²
- Only four percent of interpersonal violence is attributable to mental illness alone.³
- Decades of research have identified various behaviors that *do* indicate an elevated risk of violence. Past violent behavior is the best predictor of future violence, regardless of a diagnosis of mental illness.⁴ Domestic violence,⁵ substance misuse,⁶ alcohol misuse,⁷ and illegal use of controlled substances⁸ also increase the risk of violence.

When we blame a shooter's behavior on mental illness, we are stigmatizing and discriminating against people living with mental illness. Terms such as "the dangerously mentally ill" are misleading, disparaging, and not based on evidence.

It's important to remember that mental illness is part of a person in the same way that race and national origin are; diagnoses do not define individuals, but mental illness is not a choice. We can't choose where we come from, we can't choose what we look like, and we can't choose whether or not to have a mental illness.

The way we talk about gun violence - and the laws that we support - should be based on facts, not falsehoods. To be effective, we must focus on dangerous behavior - not genetics and not diagnoses.

¹ Swanson JW, Roberston AG, Frisman LK, Norko MA, Lin HJ, Swartz MS, Cook PJ. (2013). Preventing Gun Violence Involving People with Serious Mental Illness. *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis*, 33-51.

² Choe JY, Teplin LA, Abram KM. Perpetration of violence, violent victimization, and severe mental illness: balancing public health concerns. *Psychiatr. Serv.* 2008;59(2):153-64

³ Metz J, MacLeish KT. Mental illness, mass shootings, and the politics of American firearms. *Am. J. Public Health.* 2015;105(2):240-49.

⁴ Cook PJ, Ludwig J, Braga AA. Criminal Records of Homicide Offenders. *JAMA.* 2005;294(5):598-601.

⁵ Campbell JC, Glass N, Sharps PW, Laughon K, Bloom T. Intimate partner homicide: Review and implications of research and policy. *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse.* 2007;8(3), 246-269.

⁶ Boles SM, Miotto K. Substance abuse and violence: A review of the literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior.* 2003;8(2):155-174.

⁷ Elbogen EB, Johnson SC. The intricate link between violence and mental disorder: results from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and related conditions. *Arch Gen Psychiatry.* 2009;66(2):152-61.

⁸ Webster DW, Vernick JS. Keeping firearms from drug and alcohol abusers. *Injury Prevention* 2009;15:425-427.